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Listening, resistance and mobile phone playlists: musical listening practices of Syrian women living as refugees in northern Jordan

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, when the Syrians poured into the streets in nationwide protest against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, they did so in song. Public places became filled with the voices of men, women and children who gained courage and determination through an increasing repertoire of songs shared through social media and learned in the homes and on the streets. Later as the violence intensified in the street, the women returned to their homes, their voices no longer heard in the public protests, their songs playing now from behind closed doors. When their homes were destroyed, many took their children and walked to the safety of neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, songs saved on SIM cards tucked into their bras. This paper looks at those living in the border towns of northern Jordan and at the role the revolutionary songs play in their lives. Through analysis of the songs on the mobile phones of 45 women and interviews with them and their families on the role these have in their day-to-day life, British ethnomusicologist Karen Boswall and Jordanian social anthropologist Dr Ruba Al Akash ask how the songs are contributing to the women's sense of self and their connection with the country they left behind.

Keywords: Syrian refugees; mobile phone; cell phone; voice; resistance

Introduction

Heaven, Heaven, Heaven, my country is Heaven,
We love our country, with its sweet-smelling soil
Even the fire in my country is like heaven.
Revolt, revolt Dera'a you are a candle to our darkness

(Adapted traditional song 'Jana Jana' [Heaven, Heaven]. Sung by refugee children, recorded in the streets of Jordan, September 2014. Guide translation from the Arabic by Al Akash.)

The power of song to unite people and to bring about social change has been widely recognised within liberation struggle and popular resistance discourses. Listening to and participating in music making is also recognised as an important element of the emotional survival of refugees in situations of forced migration, both in sustaining a sense of national identity and in expressing and channelling

shared emotions and feelings. Where popular struggle and armed liberation has resulted in mass exodus, the performativity of songs from the struggle also provide a continued participatory involvement in resistance and protest. In the case of the 2011 Syrian uprising, the revolutionary songs entered the popular culture forming an important tool of resistance, mobilising and strengthening the voice of the protestors across the country. In the subsequent ongoing civil war, the songs continue to galvanise the spirits, both of those who took up arms and those who fled the violence. They were recorded in home studios across the country, played on newly created revolutionary television and radio stations and shared through social media, Bluetooth and in the liminal spaces of public protest and defiance. The majority of these songs are written and performed by men. This paper asks what of the women, in particular the women living as refugees? An estimated 4.8 million Syrians have fled their country since 2011, of these over 650,000 of these are registered as refugees in neighbouring Jordan. The majority of these are women and children.¹ What is their relationship to these songs? What role does the mobile phone play for those women, often isolated in their new homes, who, without the support network and guardianship of the men in their extended families can see their homes more as prisons than places of refuge (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015).² Do the songs speak to them? Do women who have fled their country also engage in the participatory and performative experience of the Syrian songs of protest and struggle? Through looking at the changing listening habits of Syrian women refugees in northern Jordan, in particular through discussing the music the women have on their mobile phones, we assess the role the revolutionary songs have in their lives. We argue that understanding this relationship to the songs and the way this has changed since the initial uprisings in 2011 provides a deeper knowledge both of the female experience of the revolution and war in Syria and of their continued engagement and connection with their country as refugees. It also provides a new gendered perspective to the role of protest and resistance songs for Syrian women, who are rarely the authors or performers of these songs, and whose response to and relationship with the songs is not commonly reported or recognised.

Context of the study

Syrians are angry.
We are trying to bring dignity and to live happily.
For years ruled by a tyrant,
Killing, intimidation, imprisonment and inhumane torture,
We took to the streets peacefully and you met us with bullets!

(Song sung by refugee children, recorded in the streets of Jordan, September 2014. Guide translation by Al Akash.)

The 2011 Syrian uprising began in March in Dara'a, a town in the South of Syria, close to the Jordanian border with a public protest inspired by a wave of public resistance in the region later to be referred to as the Arab Spring. When the townsfolk, including the women, took to the streets, the response of the military was brutal, with the murder, imprisonment and torture of those

suspected of supporting the growing opposition to the Assad regime. Women began to flee across the nearby border into Jordan with their sons and daughters while many men remained, some taking up arms, others continuing to search for missing family members and protecting the family home. By early 2012 the population of the Jordanian border town of Irbid was swelling by the day and in July 2012 the United Nations opened Al Za'atari camp near the border city of Al Mafraq. It was soon to become the largest refugee settlement in the region. Initially the majority of the increasing number of refugees came from the revolutionary stronghold in and around Dara'a but were soon joined by families from across Syria as the revolution spread across the country, and with it, new popular revolutionary songs such as 'Yalla irhal ya Bashar' (Come on Bashar, leave) were sung by thousands in public spaces and videos shared instantly across the country and the diaspora through social media.³

Come on Bashar, leave, (call)
Come on Bashar, leave, (response)
Come on Bashar, Get out! (Call)
Come on Bashar, Get out! (Response)

Bashar, you are not from us
Take Maher⁴ and push off
Your legitimacy here has ended

Bashar, you're a liar.
To hell with you and your speech,
Freedom is at the door,

Oh Maher, You're a coward.
You're an agent of the Americans.
The Syrian people won't be humiliated

Bashar you're an ass
And all those who support you
So come on Bashar, Get out!

Bashar, you are nothing
Those who salute you are nothing
We no longer recognise you

Bashar, you're the infiltrator
To hell with you and your Ba'ath Party
You can't even pronounce the letter 's'⁵

Bashar stop hiding
You're a wanted man in Hama
Your mistakes won't be forgiven

You create new thieves every day
Shaleesh, Rami and Maher
They robbed my brothers and uncles
We will remove Bashar with our strength

Syria wants 'freedom' (crowd)
Syria wants 'freedom' (crowd)⁶

Translated from the Arabic by Ghias Aljundi and Revolutionary Dabke
(Halasa and Omareen, 2014, p. 212)

The songs that emerged from these centres of protest and resistance, in particular from Dera'a, Homs and Hama became anthems for the opposition, their authors galvanising public sentiment, bringing them into the public eye and making them both heroes of the revolution and targets for the government forces.⁷ A generation who had grown up in an environment where public dissent was unheard of were expressing their defiance and hope through song. Charismatic chanters led the crowd in the chorus as they expressed the previously inexpressible through their megaphones. In Homs, the initially peaceful protests escalated into violent clashes with government forces, and a protracted siege of the city produced another wave of refugees into Jordan in 2013.⁸ Soon, voices of children repeating the refrains of songs such as 'Yalla irhal ya Bashar' formed part of the soundscape of the refugee camps across Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. As refugees left the camps to settle in nearby towns, residents became accustomed to the sound of Syrian children chanting on street corners and in doorways of buildings inhabited by refugees.

In northern Jordan the refugee population grew at an alarming rate and increasing numbers of families moved with their children to rented rooms in the nearby towns of Irbid, Al Ramtha and Al Mafrq (Al Akash and Boswall 2016). Most of those fleeing Syria in the early years of the conflict were fleeing the persecution of the regime due to some perceived or real affiliation with opposition groups, who, in the case of Dera'a and Homs were largely run by the Free Syrian Army. The majority of the women living as refugees in northern Jordan were from families supportive of these groups.

Methodology

I'm coming back to you, my country,
You are more precious than my children,
With your love I will shout the loveliest address.
You are the remaining hope
You are where I can find love, my happiness,
You are my eternal love.

The opening of 'Rajealek Ya Bladi' (I'm coming back to you, my country) by Ahmad Abu Khater⁹ From the mobile phone ringtone of Halad (Al Shajarah Focus Group). Guide translation Al Akesh.

This paper was born out of a firm belief that 'voice' is not always expressed through 'speech' (Parpart and Kabeer 2010) and that new forms of listening are required for researchers to get beyond the limitations of speech (Jackson 2012). Through spending time with women living as

refugees in rented accommodation in the border towns of Irbid and Ramtha, listening to the songs on their mobile phones and discussing and observing their daily listening practices, we found new ways to learn about the women's concerns and desires. The women and girls discussed the ideas and memories triggered by the song, both individually and in groups. Over the 12-month period of research it became clear that for many of these women their mobile phones and in particular the songs in these phones played an essential role in their self-expression, the formation and reformation of their identity and their continued connection with their country, those they have left behind, and with God.

The fieldwork was carried out in Jordan in four two-week blocks spread out over a twelve-month period between September 2013 and September 2014. Over the year, approximately 120 hours of discussion were documented with 89 participants, and songs gathered from the mobile phone playlists of 45 women (see Table 1). The study was broken into four periods of research in September 2013, and January, March and September 2014. Relationships were developed and maintained over the 12-month period. As the understanding of the values and day-to-day realities of the women deepened over the first seven months, the methodology shifted from more general questioning around songs and the role of music to a specific focus on playlists on mobile phones and associated listening habits. Men were invited to participate in the family groups and focus groups as it was our objective to compare the women's listening habits and relationships to the songs with those of the men in the family, however with many of the households visited being headed by women and many male family members spending much of their time away from the home, it was decided to focus this study on the listening habits of the women. It is hoped there will be further study comparing the listening habits of men and women amongst the refugee communities in the future. The women who participated were aged between 14 and 66. Their levels of education ranged from those whose university and secondary education had been brought to a halt by the conflict to women who had married at a very young age, prior to completing primary education. All the women were practising Muslims.

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN NORTHERN JORDAN			
Family Groups, Focus Groups and One-On-One Interviews			
SUMMARY	Men	Women	Total
TOTAL CONTRIBUTORS ACTIVE IN FAMILY DISCUSSIONS AND FOCUS GROUPS (WITH AND WITHOUT PLAYLISTS AND LISTENING HABIT ANALYSIS)	6	83	89
PHASE 1 SEPTEMBER 2013			
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS IN FAMILY GROUPS WITHOUT PLAYLIST ANALYSIS	1	38	39
PHASE 2 JANUARY 2013			
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS IN FAMILY FOCUS <u>GROUPS WITH PLAYLIST</u> AND LISTENING HABIT ANALYSIS	5	13	18
PHASE 3 MARCH 2013			
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS IN WOMENS FOCUS GROUPS <u>WITH PLAYLIST</u> AND LISTENING HABIT ANALYSIS	0	32	32
PHASE 4 SEPTEMBER 2014			
TOTAL IN DEPTH ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS ON PLAYLISTS AND LISTENING HABITS	0	9	9

Table 1. Breakdown of research participants Sept 2013 – Sept 2014

The selection process of the participants was designed to include women whose lives reflected the majority of refugees still outside the support network of the international donor community, while at the same time including women from as wide a variety of social and educational backgrounds as possible. Introductions were made between the researchers and the participants through a combination of personal contacts and informal encounters rather than through any large international organisations. Through these independent introductions, it was possible to approach women living outside of international donor support, and so reflect the majority of women refugees living in the region. As trust developed with the women, the relationships that progressed became intimate while remaining independent and free of some of the expectations sometimes associated with proximity to the donor community.

Speech-based participation, through focus groups, interviews and conversations is now widely recognised as an indispensable modus operandi of participatory practice; or as Cecile Jackson describes it; “the sine qua non of progressive change” (Jackson 2012, 1000). Although speech-based communication was an important part of the research methodology, gesture and tone within the interviews were also attended to, and we honed our ability as ethnographers to ‘listen and hear’, the voices of the women we met, even when they were silent (Jackson 2012). The process of listening to the songs on the women’s mobile phones was an effective way for the women to speak and us to listen. It also stimulated emotional conversations, triggered memories, provoked stories and much laughter as well as tears. Taking this approach in small groups of either neighbours or families enabled an engaging and stimulating exchange.

Our methodological approach sought to take into account the increased physical and social isolation that characterises the lives of many of the Syrian women living in northern Jordan and shapes their levels of trust and intimacy with all outsiders. It draws on the different perspectives of the two authors of this paper; a British ethnomusicologist and a Jordanian anthropologist. The

qualitative methodology largely took the form of informal conversations, in order to maintain a safe and informal environment, while a clearly defined set of objectives was established for each interview, focus group or discussion. It was also important to ensure the sessions were not rushed, allowing enough time to create an atmosphere of trust whilst not taking up too much of the participants' time or abusing the hospitality of the host. Schedules were kept flexible in order to allow the hosts and their guests to determine the duration of the visits. Individual family interviews tended to last around two hours, with the focus groups lasting around four. Women brought their children and time was spent drinking tea and getting to know one another before introducing the research questions. Sometimes icebreakers were used such as singing songs from one another's culture and playing with the children. The women and children also enjoyed recording the songs or the children's voices and playing them back or taking photographs and sharing them and this also established a relaxed environment. Sessions began with more structured questioning to ascertain basic facts and moved to unstructured questioning, using a responsive and intuitive approach in order to discuss emotions, decisions and coping mechanisms. The very private process of sharing mobile phone playlists and discussing song choice and listening habits flowed from this in the later stages of each encounter. This was only possible when a trusting relationship had developed with the participants. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and on some occasions, with informed consent, audio recordings and/or video recordings of the interviews were made.¹⁰

Findings from the research

The important role of the mobile phone

In the humble and cramped living spaces of most of the refugees in northern Jordan, the main room was invariably dominated by a television set. In addition to this, each household we visited had at least one mobile phone, often a smartphone. The women saw both as a necessity, not a luxury, helping them maintain communication with those left behind in Syria and informing them on the war and destruction of their towns and villages. The mobile phones in particular were also used to gather, store and replay songs that have an essential role in their day-to-day lives.

Songs were shared largely using Bluetooth. This was not easy as there were very few opportunities for the women to leave their homes, some of whom spend months at a time indoors (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015). Some relied on their sons or husbands for the collection of the songs. Others received their files via WhatsApp or Viber. Phone credit was an essential element in the household economy. Some of the women allowed themselves short periods of time on Facebook every day to receive material and information from Syria and from other refugees now scattered across the world.

In one focus group discussion with women in Irbid, Ramin, who had fled Dera'a with her four small children and couldn't afford phone credit, described how she filmed videos of songs from the television so she could watch them later in private. Om Hossam, who was also in Jordan without her husband used her mobile phone to talk to her husband in Syria. He was shot a few months before and was unable to leave his bed in a room on the ground floor. A neighbour would run between her husband's bed and the roof five floors up where there was a mobile phone signal, passing messages

between them. She showed us the messages. They were songs. 'This is how he talks to me', she explained. In one family home, one mobile was topped up with data once a week. 'We need the contact with Syria' it was explained to us; 'We prefer not to eat meat so we can have our airtime and data'. Although the women found it difficult to put into words, many explained how they would feel better after listening to the songs and audio recordings. 'They make us sad, but then afterwards it's as if the sadness is lifted for a while', Reham explained. 'They remind us of all we have been through, and all that has been done to us and our people. It makes us determined never to give up'.

With the technological advances of the smartphone and related mobile phone technology, the listening described by the women is often a multi-sensory experience. The private and isolated worlds of the women being connected not only through listening to songs, but also through watching videos, looking at photographs, art, text, and through sharing these with others. The mobile phone has become a portal through which people can communicate with a real and virtual community both actively, through sharing data, or passively through shared listening and viewing experiences. Listening to songs often also involved watching them and while describing the motivation behind a listening experience, many women would make reference not just to the lyrics, but also to the visual images in the accompanying video.

One song, 'Aini Hazeenah' (My Sad Eyes) by a refugee from Dera'a, Ahmad Al Kassim, has an accompanying video that forms a particularly important element of the 'listening' experience.

There is no sleep for my sad eyes,
The pain in my heart keeps me awake
The people of my country so oppressed,
Syria, you are our very existence.

Oh, my country, please don't blame us
Woe to the one who forced us away
Brave women lead the battle on the front lines
Be well, Oh eyes of the nation
You laugh while your heart is sad
There is no sleep for my sad eyes
The pain in my heart keeps me awake
The people of my country so oppressed
Syria, you are our very existence

Extract from 'Aini Hazeenah' (My Sad Eyes) by Ahmad Al Kassim. Guide translation Al Akash.¹¹

The video includes footage of funerals and demonstrations that some of the women remembered attending. The combined listening and viewing experience triggered memories and associations that provoke a painful and deeply emotional response whilst reaffirming the women's identity and sense of self. While watching the video, one young woman, Wallah, shared how her uncle was killed at one of the demonstrations. Another, Rahaf, described how the first time she saw the video she was shocked to see the dead body of her neighbour's daughter. 'That's how I knew the little girl was dead', she told us. Om Qutiba stopped the video on a shot of a street with a little girl walking down it; 'That's where I used to live' She told us. 'It's all rubble now'. A flurry of shared memories ensued as women exchanged news of more recent destruction. Wallah's brother Haitham was in Dera'a and

had recently tried to find their house. 'He couldn't even find the street, it was all so unrecognisable'. The quiet woman hosting the focus group, Om Hossam, had not spoken for some time. Her eyes were welling up. 'I listen to Aini Hazeenah every day'. The tone in the room changed as the women remembered their own regular private listening to this song, and the tears they inevitably shed while listening.

Another characteristic of the smartphone that contributes to the reaffirmation of sense of self is its capacity to record and replay sound. Professional productions of songs and videos produced in Damascus and abroad were saved in the women's phones alongside domestic audio recordings and home videos, each forming part of the women's affective relationship with the portable device. In one extraordinary example of the relationship between sound, memory and mobile phones, Rahaf played us the shrieking sound of a rocket falling and exploding near her house. She recorded it while sheltering under a table with her children, making a game of recording the sounds to distract them. Still now they ask to hear the recording to be reminded of what they had left behind.

The changing playlists

Over the 12-month research period the situation in Syria changed at an alarming rate. This was reflected in the changing relationships women refugees had with the songs. In September 2013, there was still some sense of hope that those who remained in Syria would succeed in ousting the President and that the refugees would soon be able to return to their country and build a new life. In the corridors, stairwells and streets of Irbid and Ramtha, children sang the songs from the protests they had taken part in, often encouraged by the women.¹² Televisions were tuned to Syrian channels and the sound of songs from the revolution was a permanent part of the domestic soundscape.

Freemen's army keep going,
Retain your faith and insistence.
You will have your land back by blood.
Stand up. Don't give up.
Rise up for us, our troops
Protect us from the enemies' betrayal.

Popular FSA anthem 'Ya Jaish Elahrar Taqadam' 'Go forward army of Free Men). Recorded from the television in September 2013¹³. Guide translation from the Arabic by Al Akash.

The most popular song described as a favourite by many of the children in the families visited was a rousing and victorious revolutionary tune often on the television accompanied by images from the popular Japanese animation of the UFO robot cartoon Grendizer.¹⁴

Revolution, Revolution we will win
We defend your soil, Syria
All with one aim
To topple the regime
We make a dream,
We weave a thought to all people

To spread hope
And build a nation big enough for everyone
Your people are free, Syria
We know what we want;
Wealth, justice, and love.
We have the right to resist the enemy.
Stand for our Syrian revolution
Who stands up will rise up.

Recorded from the television in September 2013. Guide translation from the Arabic, Al Akash.

In one small two-room basement apartment in Irbid, we met Aysha who lived with her parents and four younger sisters. They had arrived from Homs nine months before we met. Aysha was a medical student in her final year at the University of Homs when the public uprising began in Syria in 2011. She described the excitement of being part of these extraordinary public gatherings; of the sense of hope she felt, singing songs of defiance with thousands of others, and how, caught up in the euphoria, she even forgot her commitment to public modesty as she danced and clapped and responded to the calls of the chanter, chanting loud rude insults at the President, something inconceivable only months before.

Aysha and her family left with very few possessions. Much of what she did take with her was left in the desert during the arduous journey to the Jordanian border. One thing that remained tucked into her bra throughout however, was a SIM card filled with revolutionary songs. These fuelled her new sense of self and reaffirmed her identity as an agent of change. 'I had the songs on my phone and listened to them all the time. We all did. It made us feel a part of the struggle still', she told us. The displacement to Jordan separated Aysha from her extended family, and despite the company of her immediate family, she often felt isolated and alone (Akash & Boswall, 2015).¹⁵ However, with the songs playing out of the small speaker in her mobile phone, even alone, Aysha continued to participate in the struggle for change. She downloaded new songs shared on social media, and found a virtual effervescent space (Durkheim, 1915) to return to the liminal sense of communitas (Turner, 1969) she first experienced in the streets of Homs in 2011.

It's time for freedom
for people not to cower in their houses
old and young we know that
who kills his people is a traitor
we asked for freedom
and we are the asking people
of Hams, Dara'a and Baniyas
hold your head high

A song by Abdul Bassat Sarut. Recorded sung by young Syrian boy in the streets of Jordan, September 2014¹⁶. Translated from the Arabic by Feras Qusairy.

Over time, however, as the initial uprising in Syria descended into an increasingly complex civil war, and the binary struggle between political oppression and democratic freedom that was reflected in the songs popular in 2013 was being replaced by a multi-faction conflict dominated by

religion, these early songs from the revolution were all but silenced. By September 2014, at the end of our research period, there was little hope of return, and the songs of victory and revolution just brought with them disappointment and sadness: 'I can't listen to those songs of victory and hope any more', Aysha explained, 'I feel too angry and let down. I deleted them from my playlist'.

Songs that reflected the pain of separation, the grief, the sadness and longing for the country and lives they had lost were popular among the women. These emotions were reflected not only in the songs being listened to but also in the more private listening habits described by the women.

Private listening, prayer and tears

Although some of the songs were still listened to communally by the family, as time passed the women described how important these songs had become to their daily private lives. The morning would be a time for playing prayers and recitations from the mobile phone and making a strong connection to God and the evening would be for the songs from the Syrian revolution and subsequent exile. Women described how the religious songs and recitations would play from the small speakers from the phones as they did their morning housework, giving them blessings for the day ahead. The evening however, when the children were asleep and they were alone, this was the time to listen to the songs from the revolution. The songs connected them to the people who remained in Syria and were suffering and in pain. The women described how the songs ensured they shared the suffering of those fighting for them and those unable to leave as they had. By listening to the songs whilst watching the accompanying videos of destroyed cities, children's bodies lying in pools of blood, aftermaths of massacres and grief-stricken mourners at funerals, the women ensured they never forgot. They described how they saved their pain and their tears for these private times with the songs, sometimes crying for two hours a night, whilst repeating the songs on their playlist and connecting with their suffering and fighting brethren. This was not passive listening; this was an act of private solidarity and connection, an evening ritual, much like prayer. The songs served as portals to the world they left behind, ensuring they never became complacent in their relative safety. By not forgetting and using the songs to keep the pain alive, provoking the tears every night, the women continued to play their role as mothers, sisters, daughters and wives from across the border. The re-lived grief was contained to a specific and private time and place. By creating a listening ritual, the women were able to function more strongly during the day, keeping their pain from their children and those around them, knowing that in the evening they would be safe to cry. After crying, the women explained, they felt some relief. 'It makes me feel more comfortable', Rahaf from Dara'a explained.

During the first six months of the research, the women were in tears a lot of the time, as were we. This had changed come September 2014. Many of the women said they couldn't go on crying every day and had to find ways to control their emotions. The structured and more ritualistic evening listening to the songs was a way the women could channel and divest these powerful emotions in the evening while being able to function without tears during the rest of the day. The allocated hour or two in the evening, when they were free to cry, was painful, and they would feel

very sad during this time, but at the end of the fixed period, the release of the emotions gave them some relief, and they felt better.

One song that formed part of the daily evening listening ritual was 'Ya Heif' (Oh Shame) by Samih Shuqeir. This song is an acoustic recording, with Shuqeir's plaintive voice accompanied only by the Oud and darbuka.¹⁷ Sung using Maqam Saba,¹⁸ sometimes referred to as the saddest of all maqams, the song is written in the form of a letter from a son to his mother, describing what he saw and how he felt as witness to the military's response to the public uprising of the young people in Dera'a. It expresses the grief of those in mourning and the sadness of those still in Syria, separated from their mothers. It opens low and quiet and builds over the first minute to a cry of desperation when Shuqeir cries out 'they shot us mother, with live bullets'.

Oh Alas, how shameful!
A hail of heavy bullets falling on the unarmed people's heads
And children, the age of young flowers being arrested. How can that be?
Alas, this is happening in Dera'a dear mother.
The youngsters heard that freedom was at their door, mother,
And they went out to greet it.
They saw the guns, but, oh mother, they thought
These are our brothers
They will not shoot us,
But they shot us mother, with live bullets.
We were killed by our brother's hand.

Extract of 'Ya Heif', by Samih Shuqeir¹⁹. Guide translation by Al Akash.

The women told of how they would play the same song over and over while connecting to the suffering of their struggling brethren and crying. For them, all of their daily acts, both religious and worldly are based on the ultimate objective of being close to God. The tears shed during the ritual listening of songs such as 'Ya Heif' have more in common with the act of weeping during prayer, than tears provoked by the pain of personal suffering. Ritual weeping during prayer is said to be 'the ultimate sign of performing ṣalāt (ritual prayer) with kushū (consummate excellence), enacted with the intention of pleasing God (Mahmood 2012 130). When women described their evening listening, with statements such as; 'I listen to the songs and cry', they were communicating an act of reverence; of wanting to please God, which was at the root of much of their private listening practice.

Like ritual prayer, the evening listening of the songs from Syria formed part of 'a continuum of practises that serve as the necessary means to the realization of a pious self' (128). By listening to the songs every evening, they become, like ritual prayers, 'critical instruments in a teleological program of self-formation' (128), ensuring the listeners never forget the suffering of others, never feel complacent about their own relative comfort, and actively seek ways to access the pain felt by their brethren. Through private listening, the women are effectively 'honing and securing their moral capacities', and avoiding a state of 'careless, negligence' known as ghafla (130).

Ringtones as non-verbal resistance

One notable exception to the women's otherwise private listening is through their choice of mobile phone ringtone. Many of the women had chosen one of two songs as their ringtone. One was the revolutionary song 'Heaven' (Jana), a kind of 'anthem' of the struggle, also popular with the children.

Heaven, Heaven, my country is heaven
Oh God our country, we love our country,
Her soil smells so sweet,
Even the fire in my country is a heaven.
Revolt, revolt, Dera'a!
You are a candle to our darkness,
A woman from Homs calls for a help.
In Arab land a woman is not afraid of difficulties,
We don't know hardship, we are heroes, ask us!
Aleppo the mother of honorable,
Syria is calling for Jihad, don't let us down.
Oh Hamah forgive us, you are for us and from us,
Our hope is from God, God won't let us down.
Our martyr did not die, sing for him girls,
Maids and mermaids are waiting him in heaven.²⁰

Adaptation from traditional song made popular by Abdul Bassat Sarut. Sung by refugee children in every home and street corner. Guide Translation by Al Akash.

The other was 'Rajealek Ya Bladi' (I'm coming back to you my country) by Ahmad Abu Khater. The 12-second introduction of this song is very distinctive, and immediately recognisable. The haunting melody of the instrumental opening is a sonic trigger, which, for those who know the song, contain the essence of the lyrics that are to come:

How many children were martyrs?
Like birds you smashed their heads,
And you killed a girl like a crushed rose,
And you killed the child who stood up to you,
And you killed the mother in cold blood,
As she watched on in fear
And you killed the photographer with such aggression
And you killed the witness
You don't know your God to fear punishment²¹

Extract from 'Rajealek Ya Bladi' by Ahmad Abu Khater. Guide translation by Al Akash.

The ringtone becomes a sonic act of resistance, enabling the women to speak through the music. This innovative form of resistant and expressive forms of voice, is one of the 'multiple registers' discussed by Cecile Jackson in her article on speech, gender and power through which the 'voiceless' women are 'speaking' through their ringtones, and through which they 'embed, unsettle and resignify' language (Jackson 2012, 1000).

Jane Parpart and Naila Kabeer (2010), who have written on the subject of voice in relation to agency and empowerment, describe how silences can 'speak' effectively for the voiceless, and that 'voice', especially when understood as some kind of expression of identity, does not necessarily

need to be equated with 'speech' (Parpart and Khabeer 2010, 8). In what they describe as 'an increasingly dangerous world', the option of silence over speech is an empowering strategy (8). For the women in the study who selected these specific personalised ringtones, the mobile ringtone became an important vehicle of personal expression and resistance through a form of silence; they themselves can remain silent, while their ringtone speaks for them.

While some of the Syrian women saw their listening practice and use of ringtones as an act of resistance not only against the regime, but also against their oppression as women, there were others who did not see themselves as engaged in resistance at all. Although angry at the brutal way President Bashar Al Assad and his military responded to the popular demands for change, for them, the songs were an apolitical expression of their identity as mothers, wives and daughters and not as a silent act of protest. It is important to recognise both perspectives, not to 'romanticise resistance' (Abu-Lughod, 1990) and to avoid what Jackson refers to as 'ventriloquizing' the aspirations and needs of those with no voice (Jackson 2012, 1002) while nonetheless noting an innovative and silent (or non-verbal) expression of voice and identity for those women who had, for a few brief months, shared the public space with the men and expressed their discontent, through song. Their voice may have been muted and returned in many instances to the private world behind closed doors, but the song continues to 'speak' for them when no words leave their lips.

Conclusion

For many Syrian women in northern Jordan, songs from Syria play an essential part in their daily lives contributing both to their well-being and their sense of self as refugees. These songs are held as treasures, kept safe in their mobile phones. Understanding the relationship the women have to the songs, how they form part of their daily lives and the way this has changed since the initial uprisings in 2011 provides a deeper knowledge both of the female experience of the revolution and war in Syria and of their continued engagement and connection with their country as refugees. Through songs it is possible to get beyond the facts and the figures to the feelings behind them. As the situation changes for Syrians both inside the country and in the countries where they seek refuge, so too do the songs shared and listened to. Over the years in exile, the songs have given hope and solace, inspiration and courage, and continue to connect refugees to others in exile and those who remain in Syria. In the rapidly changing and turbulent times for Syrian refugees in northern Jordan between September 2013 and September 2014, the songs on the women's mobile phones acted as a trigger and a portal to a country and a people no longer part of their physical world. No sooner had they found their public voice in 2011 than it was taken away again and they were pushed back into their homes, their voices muted. The relationship the women have with songs is experienced not in the visible and public realm, but in the very private and often spiritual realm of solitary listening. The participatory yet private listening practice contributes to relieving their isolation in exile, increasing social bonding and informing and developing a sense of self. For women who are too often invisible and inaudible in the public world, the songs connect them both to one another and to those who remain in Syria. Not only do the mobile phones serve as a point of contact with family members in Syria, but also enable a participatory connection to their country

and its present pain, through images, video, text and sound, but in particular, through song. The songs serve to maintain a connection with others, but also with a part of themselves, helping them to process emotions and to express and reaffirm their identity. The combined listening and viewing experience triggers memories and associations that provoke a painful and deeply emotional response whilst reaffirming the women's identity and sense of self. When the women listen to songs of resistance and protest, they are privately performing their own resistance by giving voice to their anger and pain. Listening to songs from Syria forms as much a part of the private daily routine as their daily prayers. As important as connecting to God through religious songs and koranic recitations in the morning, for the women in this study, the evening would be for connecting to Syria. For these Syrian women living behind closed doors in displacement and exile, the night-time ritual listening to songs and laments instil hope, serving as affective portals where relationships are built and maintained with individuals, communities, with the self and with God. For as long as the women remain in their relatively closed and isolated lives however, their listening habits will remain private and the mobile phones will continue to connect them to the public world not only through conversation, but also through song.

Notes

1. According to the UNHCR (data portal (UNHCR 2017), there were 656,170 registered refugees on 16 February 2017. 76.7% of these are women (25.8%) and children (50.9%) children. There are many more Syrians who moved to Jordan from Syria and did not register as refugees for whom there is less specific data.
2. According to Islamic law a woman must not travel alone or be visited by a man without a male family member (*mahram*) present. See Bukhari #1763 'A man stood up and asked Allah's Prophet (Peace be upon Him): "O Messenger of Allah! My wife is going on Hajj (pilgrimage), while I want to participate in a battle, what should I do?" The Prophet of Allah (Peace be upon Him) said: "Go out with her"'.
3. '*Yalla irhal ya Bashar!*' was one of the anthems of the revolution. First sung in public during mass demonstrations in the city of Hama, recorded on mobile 'phones and picked up and shared across the country. It was translated into English (freedom for everyone, 2011), re-versioned into club versions (Loading DZ, 2011) and sung in public squares by the thousands. It was attributed to Ibrahim Quashoush who was reportedly found dead with his tongue cut out some time later, reflecting the regime's fear of the power of the song. (See Anthony Shadid 'Lyrical Message for Syrian Leader: "Come on Bashar, Leave"', *New York Times*, 21 July 2011 and Jean-Marc Mojon 'Syria Revolution has Soundtrack' [Middle East Online. April 9th 2012](#))
4. Maher al Assad, Bashar's brother, commander of the elite Republican Guard.
5. Bashar's lisp was ridiculed in many uprising songs (Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014)
6. Translated from the Arabic by Ghias Aljundi and Revolutionary Dabke (Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014, 212) – see YouTube video [freedomforeveryone20 \(2011\)](#).
7. National footballer, songster, protest leader Abdul Bassat Sarut's galvanised the protesters with songs and later took up arms and become one of the icons of the Homs resistance. See 'Return to Homs' (Derki 2013).
8. Homs is much closer to Lebanon than Jordan, however after accepting over a million refugees, the small country was full to bursting and many from Homs instead made the long journey south through the desert to Jordan.
9. See video link to *Rajealek Ya Bladi* (I'm Coming Back to You, My Country) by Ahmad Abu Khater posted by Inas al-nahhas, (2011)
10. The researchers worked in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). Within this context a small group of women welcomed us back into their homes following the initial research allowing us into their lives and homes with cameras and microphones.

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- Some of their testimonies have been made publicly available (see Boswall 2014a and 2014b), other have remained in private archives.
11. See video ‘*Aini Hazeenah*’ (My Sad Eyes) by Ahmad Al Kassim. with guide subtitles: Boswall, K. (2015b) and mobile phone footage from Zaatari Refugee camp when Ahmad Al Kassim sang there for the refugees posted by Moneer Kad, (Kad, M (2011)
 12. See clip of Syrian children in Irbid chanting in corridors of office buildings rapidly converted into makeshift homes. Recorded September 2013. Boswall, K. (2015d)
 13. See ‘♥♥ تونس من لكم تحياتي ♥♥’ (Go forward army of Free Men) of video of same song recorded from television, posted on *YouTube* by Mjouda Tunisia (2012).
 14. This cartoon was sourced on-line from links shared from children’s mobile phones. See video clip guide subtitles: Boswall, K. (2015c)
 15. For more on the isolation of women refugees see CARE (2015), IRC (2014) and UNWOMEN (2013)
 16. See *Boya Boya* (Boswall, 2015d) a short film following a young Syrian boy as he shines shoes in Irbid, Jordan and sings revolutionary songs.
 17. The *Oud* is a stringed instrument, part of the lute family and played all over the Middle East. The *darbourka* is a metallic drum with a tightly stretched skin, played in many parts of the Middle East.
 18. Like scales and modes, *maqams* are a series of notes that form the melodic structure to much Middle Eastern music.
 19. See ‘حيف يا - شقير سميع’ ‘Ya Haif’ or ‘Ya Hef’ (Oh, Shameful) by Samih Shuqeir posted on YouTube.com by ‘Kurd Syrian’ 2011.
 20. See video link recording of popular song ‘ساروت الباسط عبد وطننا يا والله جنة جنة جنة’ ‘Jana Jana Jana’ (Heaven, Heaven, Heaven) recorded by Abdul Basat Sarut (2012) and posted on YouTube by Khals Omar (2012). Found on the majority of the women’s mobile phones in Sept 2014 and commonly used as ringtones.
 21. See *Rajealek Ya Bladi* (I’m Coming Back to You, My Country) by Ahmad Abu Khater posted by Inas al-nahhas (2011)

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